

#189 LEO B. SOUCY: USS *UTAH*

John Martini (JM): This is an oral history interview videotape we're doing with Mr. Leo Soucy, a survivor of USS *UTAH*. The date is the --- today is the third of December, 1991. It's approximately 1040 hours. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki in Honolulu. I'm John Martini, National Park Service ranger. Videotape number two.

On December 7, 1941, Mr. Soucy was a Pharmacist's Mate Second Class aboard target ship USS *UTAH*. This videotape is being done in conjunction with the National Park Service and KHET television, Honolulu.

Mr. Soucy, the first question I'd like to ask you about is how did you get into the Navy?

Leo Soucy (LS): Hard times.

(Laughter)

LS: It's the 1937, you know, there was still the depression and then the Navy was a good place to be. Of course, I was fascinated with the Navy anyway, apart from not having jobs, you know, at that time.

JM: Was the *UTAH* your first ship?

LS: Yes. I -- being the first two years I was in the Navy -- I went to different schools, you know, medical related schools and I was in San Diego. I was in the Fleet Marine Force, and then in February of '41, February 28, I was transferred to the *UTAH*, which was in Long Beach.

JM: When did the *UTAH* come out to Honolulu, to join the rest of the fleet?

LS: Well, we had two trips, in February or March, rather, we went to, came to Pearl Harbor and we were a gunnery school as well as a bombing target, and we would usually have six, seven, eight weeks of gunnery. We would take gunners from the different ships. We had the latest guns in the fleet incidentally, and we would get gunners on Monday and then they would shoot down drones, you know, learn the gunnery. And after about a couple of months of that, then we became a bombing target. The guns were covered and some of the valuable guns were removed and stored below deck. So when we were a bombing target, of course, everything, all the guns were covered. And then we had two layers of timber on the deck, to soften the impact of bombs.

JM: When they came down.

LS: When, yeah. These were water or sand with black smoke.

JM: Just before December 7 itself, how long had you been in port?

LS: We came in port on Friday afternoon, on December the fifth. And we waited in mid-channel for the *LEXINGTON*, which at the time, was the world's largest aircraft carrier. As soon as the *LEXINGTON* got under way, we took her place.

JM: Same mooring keys off of Ford Island?

LS: Yes. Berth F-11 and a Japanese maps that -- and there's very few people -- I've been trying for thirty-seven years to get copies of these maps. But when the ship was sunk, I was transferred to the hospital and we would get these aviators, Japanese aviators, for days, weeks, even and they would be brought to the morgue, and when they were stripped, we found these maps, and where the *UTAH* was, they had in big letters, there was a lot of Japanese writing in the margins. But the names of all the ships, every ship, was in English. And in larger and bolder print was *LEXINGTON*. And that's where we were.

JM: The *LEXINGTON* was where. December 7 was going to be another special day for you?

LS: My enlistment was up, you see.

(Laughter)

JM: What was supposed to happen to you that day?

LS: Well, nothing except Monday the ship was scheduled to come back to the States and then I would have gotten out and I'd saved like four hundred dollars, and I was going to go to medical school. Four hundred bucks in those days was -- well, it wasn't enough to go to medical school, but for a young kid who was enough to, had enough guts to, that's what.

JM: So even though your hitch was up, you still would have been aboard, part of the crew for the trip back?

LS: Oh yes, yeah. We would have left Monday and then when we got in port, whatever port, I would have been discharged.

JM: How did you spend the day before, the night before?

LS: The day before was no, uneventful except that I didn't go anywhere. I didn't go ashore because Honolulu in those days was not, or Waikiki, was not a favorite port because there were no women. Now we're two thousand men, or a thousand, or two thousand for every woman, so we didn't like the stakes like that.

JM: So what were --- were you on duty or off duty on the morning of the seventh?

LS: No, I was off duty.

JM: When did you first notice the planes were different?

LS: Well, I happened to be looking out of a porthole, and actually I was looking at Ford Island. There was some activity there, I don't remember what. But somebody said, "What are all those planes in the air?" You know, "What are all those planes doing out on a Sunday morning?"

And I could hear vaguely a droning, you know, which was not unusual, because Ford Island was a Naval Air Station. And so about the time I looked up, skyward, I saw this globe -- I was almost positive there were six of them

coming in a V-formation. And they didn't dive right down like this, they were coming at an angle. And three of them, as I remember, went off to one side, and my eyes focused on the three, which in a way, were heading towards us. They were actually --- the first bombs that hit, hit on the hangars at Ford Island, at the tip of Ford Island. And so I just stood there and saw the bombs drop and I saw this huge red plane and black smoke, and I thought, "Oh my god, somebody really goofed, because those are real bombs."

See, we were used to being bombed with duds and I thought, "My god, somebody really made a mistake. Those are real bombs."

And just about that time, I felt the ship lurch, so we were being hit by torpedoes on the opposite side, which I couldn't, of course I couldn't see that side.

JM: So what did it feel like when the torpedo hit?

LS: When the torpedo hit, I actually felt the ship lurch. See even when we were hit were by dud bombs, the ship was somewhere around 22,000 tons. And when we got, we'd go below the armor decks of course, during the bombing runs. You know, we weren't walking around. And when the bomb would hit, we could feel the ship, but it was a downward feeling, but this was, you know, kind of an outward feeling. And I'm sure that was a torpedo. There's some question about whether the bombers got there first, or the torpedoes, but I'm sure that lurch was the torpedoes.

JM: When the --- when she got hit with the torpedo, did you know it was a torpedo? Did you suspect?

LS: Well, no, we had, you know, I'd --- we didn't know anybody was mad at us.

(Laughter)

LS: And so I didn't suspect, really suspect, you know, except, and to repeat, we thought somebody just made a mistake. They got the wrong bombs and then now they're hitting us. Well, at the time, I had no idea it was a torpedo, you know. And in a few seconds of hindsight, I figured out what's . . .

JM: So what happened next?

LS: Well, within a few seconds, we did everything by the bugle and the bosun's whistle. I'm sure the bugler was topside on the fantail, you know, ready to raise the colors. In fact, if you've seen the pictures of the sinking UTAH, you see the flag just -- they were just getting ready to hoist the colors. So the bugler and the bosun could, you know, they saw the first planes, so it was a matter of seconds before the bugler sounded general quarters. You know, that's where you go to your battle station.

And so I grabbed my first aid kit. And I was a pharmacist's mate, and my battle station was in mid-ship. And as I was running down the passageway, the ship lurched again. Now this time I don't know whether it was a bomb or torpedo, but it knocked me through a log room door. You know, where they kept the records. And so I went this way and my first aid kit went that way, and I got up a little dazed, you know. And you don't have time to think. But anyway, I dived down the ladder, below -- see, our battle stations were below

the armor deck. See, the main deck is not armored. The deck below is armored. So the battle stations or whatever your job was, you went below the armored deck.

JM: 'Cause you used like the dispensary, or . . .

LS: Well, the dispensary, of course, was above the armored deck, but each battle station had a medical personnel, you know. And so it was my duty to be down there as a corpsman, a medical corpsman, in case somebody got hurt. Well, we no sooner got down there, we could tell the ship was already listing. Now, this is a matter of one, two, three minutes. And everybody's looking around, "What in the world is going on? What's going on?" You know, what, what's happening? And we were there, I'm sure, not over a minute or two and then the bugler sounded "abandon ship," and the bosun was chanting, "Abandon ship, abandon ship." And now we're like this.

JM: Did you hear things moving as the ship started to keel over?

LS: No. And if I did, it's not recorded in my memory. It doesn't fit my mind at that time. So anyway, we got topside and I was running. See, the bulkhead, the walls of the ship that go, I say about two-thirds and then it's cut away so that the after part of the ship is exposed. So there was an officer there throwing life preservers as we went by, you see. And I thought we had taken on ammunition in San Francisco for the fleet. And the naval ammunition depot was loaded, so we were going all over the ocean with all this ammunition, and I kept thinking, "Oh my word, when this ship sinks, it's going to blow up."

And I wanted to get away from there fast, but you know, these things occur to you in a matter of seconds. And I got down on the blister, which that would require -- you know what I'm talking about. And I was really going to run out this. See, by then, the ship was like this, so I was going to run and dive way out. And about then, the ship really jerked. Well, I thought at the time, or sometime after, that it was another bomb or torpedo, but actually what it was was the mooring lines. See, there's 22,000 tons, these great big lines holding the ship tied to the quay, you know. And so, when the ship, as the ship was sinking, those lines snapped. And when they snapped, that threw me off balance and I landed on my fanny and scraped across those barnacles, you know, on the side and the bottom.

JM: Did you --- by this time, were you aware that it was a full on attack? Or were you still unclear?

LS: Well, I knew that somebody was mad at us, but I didn't know who. I had heard somebody say, "Where in the world did those Germans come from," because . . .

JM: Germans?

LS: Yeah. See, we were --- we figured sooner or later we're going to be at war with Germany, you know. And so we thought, "How did the Germans get over here?"

And so it wasn't, when I got in the water, when I bobbed up and tried to get my bearings, you know, which way is up. And I saw this motor launch, and

there was a coxswain -- I guess a coxswain -- in the bow. You know what a bow hook, a boat hook? And he was pulling these guys out of the water. So I started swimming towards that motor launch and about then a strafer came by and I could see the, you know, the ping, ping, ping in the water, the bullets, hitting the water ahead of me, but in line with that motor launch. So it didn't, you know, you make decisions in seconds. And I figured, now that's going to be a target, but they're not going to pick poor, little, old me by myself.

So I changed course, instead of going that way, I headed straight for Ford Island. And if anybody else tells you he was first on the beach, you tell him he's a liar, because I was first on the beach.

(Laughter)

JM: Did --- when you got safely on the beach and had your -- or, I'm sorry -- had *UTAH* gone completely over yet?

LS: By the time I got on the beach and looked around, yes. It was already down. It had hit bottom, you know. I didn't know that --- the harbor, we knew, wasn't very deep, you know, forty feet, I think, is

And so the ship was already laying over there and I was tanning. And about --- I was there thirty seconds or a minute -- oh -- thirty seconds or a minute, and another pharmacist's mate from the *UTAH* came struggling out of the water. And he had a first aid kit on him. See, I lost mine. And so he claims that that's the reason I beat him, is it was unfair. I didn't have anything hindering me.

So we were there, you know, just trying to get our breath, and about then a jeep came screeching by and there were two officers in there. We had our Red Cross brassard, you know, the medical personnel. The first thing you did, you got your first aid kit, got the brassard and put it on.

So we had the --- I did have the brassard on, and this jeep came to a screeching halt and he said, "Corpsman, come with us."

And we to in the jeep and they took us somewhere around the island, towards Battleship Row. And there was a bachelor officers' quarters, which happened to be a concrete building. You know, a two or three stories, I don't know if it was three, but definitely more than one story. And so when we got there, there was a bunch of men laying there, all, most of them were covered with black oil. And they were all exhausted, and they were men, I know, I met my former roommate, who, when I was transferred to the *UTAH*, he was transferred to the *OKLAHOMA*. Of course, I didn't recognize him, until he called.

But all these men are laying around, covered with oil and you know, oil running out of their mouths and nose. And some of them, of course, had had some bullet wounds, some maybe shrapnel, and some were injured, just, you know, just trying to scramble for safety.

JM: So I --- had you ever dealt with injuries like that before?

LS: Well, they were make believe, you know, first aid treatment. But as far as seeing all this, and never, all covered wounds. You know, these guys that

were bleeding, and all that oil, well, you didn't have to be very smart to figure out that Pearl Harbor was one of the largest sewers in the world and we were conscious of infection. But unless you can get that oil off, you can't treat the wound.

JM: Did you have any hesitation before you jumped in and starting treating wounded? Pretty hard when you first come across serious wounds like that.

LS: Oh no, we, you know, there was a feeling of helplessness, but no hesitation about, "We gotta do something," you know, that was our duty. That's what we've been trained for. You know, to handle casualties and we ran out of supplies in just a few minutes, you know, treating one in two minutes. And one of the officers came by and he said, "How are you doing?"

And I said, "Oh boy, we don't have anything to work with. We need some bandages," and before I could say anything, he hollered at somebody and he said, "Strip the beds." -- you know, that was bachelor officers' quarters -- "and make some bandages."

And then, I told him we needed alcohol, some solvent, or alcohol to wash the oil off the wounds. And he said, "Alcohol? Alcohol?" He said, "Will whiskey do?"

And so he came back with a case of scotch and another guy with, you know, maybe gin, rum, vodka, whatever they had. And he said, "Can you use this?"

Well, you know, it's alcohol. So we were using that for washing off the wounds so that we could put -- and, but we didn't have any more antiseptic then, but ninety proof, that's forty-five percent alcohol, it has some antiseptic effect, especially when it's applied immediately.

So I know at one point, I was walking around, I had a bottle of some liquor. I don't remember if it was gin or scotch, what. And I had a wash cloth in my hands, you know, and we poured the liquor on there and wash off the wounds, wherever they were wounded, see. And so this guy saw me, he's laying there, you know, and he said, "Hey, doc, could I have a dose of that medicine?" You know, referring to the alcohol.

So I told him, "Well, you know," and so I gave him the bottle and he took a hefty swig. And he seemed to swallow it, and he just spewed it out along with black globs of oil, you know, just You know, the booze, he vomited the liquor, but he had swallowed some oil, obviously, which I'm sure is not too good for your stomach. And so he just laid there after vomiting, and he just lay there for a minute, and then he looked at me and he said, "Doc, I lost that medicine. Could you give me another dose?"

(Laughter)

LS: Well, you know, so what can you do, you know? I give him the bottle again and I really don't remember if he threw that up too, but actually, not that I figured it out, but it happened to be a good medic, you know. It made him vomit that oil and the dirty water, well, so much the better.

JM: Did it --- a lot, I'm sure happened . . .

LS: Oh yeah.

JM: . . . in the last few days, but what, like the next couple of days, could you kind of synopsize what happened? Your ship was gone and you're a trained medical person.

LS: Yeah. Well, you know, we were persona non grata, no dog tags, no ID of any kind and most of us just had shorts and a skivvy shirt. So when most of the *UTAH* crew, they happened to be putting in a sewer line, or a water line, and there was a trench, you know, about a couple of feet wide and two or three, four feet deep. And a lot of the *UTAH* men got in there with -- see, they were still strafing and bombing.

So, but we were in the building, so after the regular people from the hospital and the Naval dispensary came over and started carrying casualties away, we joined the, the crew. So then, later, we were transferred to the hospital, but before that, if -- and you can cut this out -- but when we had run out of supplies, this Sumner, Gordon Sumner was another pharmacist's mate, and he said, "Why don't you go over to the dispensary and get some supplies? We don't have anything."

I said, "Sumner, I have no bump of direction. I get lost on the ship." I said, "I'm not about to go run over this island." I said, "You go." Not so much that I was a coward, I had good coverage and outside was . . .

So anyway, he came back a little while later and he brought a box of, you know, some solvent, benzene, and alcohol, and iodine and all that. And he said, "Boy, I had a close call when I was over there."

And I said, "What's a matter? What happened?"

He said, "A bomb dropped right in the, the courtyard."

And I looked at him. I could tell he wasn't hurt, so I shrugged it off. But that afternoon, when we were ordered to report to the dispensary, the medical personnel, for reassignment. We were walking along and he pointed to a huge crater. And he says, "That's where the bomb hit that I was telling you about."

And I could see this huge crater and I said, "Where were you?"

And he pointed to another spot, not far away. I said, "Aw, come on, if you'd been that close, you'd have been killed."

Now, we're standing, you know, close to this crater. He said, "Oh, it didn't go off."

And boy, I tell you, I took off!

(Laughter)

JM: It was still in there?

LS: It was still in there. It was a dud.

JM: I've seen it. It chewed up the entire courtyard! It was . . .

LS: See, I've seen pictures of it, and then I got to wondering, well, you know, did he really tell me truth? So I called him a few months ago, I was writing this paper, and I said, "Sumner, did you tell me that that bomb didn't go off?"

And he said, "Yeah, it was a dud. It didn't go off."

So I believed him rather than what I read in books, because they have so many erroneous impressions. So a few days later, I happened to call the editor of the *Pearl Harbor Grand*, Bob Watson. He called me, in fact, because I had written a letter, chiding the Pearl Harbor Grand for not having a word about the *UTAH* memorial. I really, you know, told him I think it's a disgrace and a shame, and all that.

So anyway, I don't know how it came about, but he said that he was on Ford Island that day. And I said, "Do you remember a bomb falling in the courtyard at the dispensary?"

He said, "Yeah, it was a dud."

So you know, that, I can look at those pictures now and, you know, the impact of the bomb, right, is the sidewalks. But some books said it just blew the dispensary apart.

JM: How did you feel about the Japanese that day? What was going through your head at those boys up there?

LS: Well, you know, as far as hate, sneaky SOBs and, you know, who knows? But I know that we didn't think it was very fair. They weren't playing according to the rules, but then, war is not a game that you play by rules anyway.

So as far as my genuine feelings, you know, it was such an unbelievable thing that you couldn't stand there and analyze it, you know. It's not . . . believe me. Even when you were --- like when I saw the *ARIZONA* burning, you couldn't believe the scene. And even what happened to me, you know, and what happened to our ship. It was just too incredible for words.

JM: Is there anything that happened that morning, or the next day following, anything that you'd really like to share or talk about, remembering that this is going to be used by researchers.

LS: Well, we spent the night on the *ARGONNE*, which was a floating record office. And after dark sometime, I think I've read since then, nine o'clock, the *ENTERPRISE*, you know, is a couple of miles out at sea, heading towards Pearl Harbor. And they had sent planes in different directions to try to find the Japanese. And these either five or six planes came in for a landing at Ford Island. They're in communication, you know, with the tower. but every ship, whether -- like the *CALIFORNIA* was halfway under water, the *NEVADA* -- every ship that had any part of it sticking above water had machine guns manned and all the shore stations. So when these planes came in, somebody opened fire and then, of course, everything. The sky was bright, they tell. Now, I was below deck. And the *CALIFORNIA* was laned directly across from us and these

fifty-caliber machine guns, you know, they have armor piercing bullets, and the *ARGONNE* was not a fighting ship. So it had a tin wall, maybe three-quarters . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

LS: . . . those bullets went through the bulkhead, the wall, and one of 'em went through one *UTAH* sailor's arm and the guy standing behind him, it pinned him right in the heart, and you know, it did, of course, it killed him instantly.

That was friendly fire. These newsmen in the Gulf War talk like friendly fire had never happened before, you know, it's something new.

So one of our own *UTAH* men on the *ARGONNE* was killed right on the spot. So I spent the night on the *ARGONNE*, and I don't know if I ever lied down. If I did, I know I didn't sleep. In fact, I was topside mostly watching the *ARIZONA* and the *WEST VIRGINIA*, and you know, the whole Battleship Row was on fire.

And so the next day I was transferred to the hospital. And when I was a medical technologist, I worked in the laboratories and I immediately reported to the laboratory and we would guard the transfusion. See, we needed blood real bad. In fact, I gave a pint of blood, and I'm not the world's biggest hero. But I did give a pint of blood and then I worked for day and night for at least two days, see. But there were guys laying -- all the beds were occupied. The space under the beds was occupied, and even the space between the beds and out on the lanais, you know, all around the hospital wards. There were men lined up all over. You know, hundreds, thousands, I guess.

JM: It must have been overpowering, just that alone.

LS: Yeah. And so the first few days, my main job was to get out and draw blood, and we had to do cross matches, and then we tried to get volunteers to donate blood. And

So in doing blood counts and different kinds of laboratory tests to find out what was wrong. I remember one time, a couple of days later, I saw an x-ray of a man that had been hit by, I guess, the tying cubes on the five-inch anti-aircraft shell, or own anti-aircraft. It went through the shoulder and here, that thing is still in his arm. You know, it's a big thing. It's still inside. Yeah.

JM: The last thing I'd really like to talk to you about is the walk, the myth that won't seem to go away. Did the Japanese

LS: The bodies

JM: . . . military think it look like a carrier?

LS: No, it didn't look anything like a carrier. And the reason I'm sure, among other things, is these hundreds of planes coming down at the same time. They were assigned certain targets, see. And they could tell way before they got to the *UTAH* that that was no carrier. But you know, at the time, they gotta do something, so I they dropped their, as I wrote, their fish and eggs --

bombs and torpedoes -- on the ship. Everybody, I've read dozens of books and they say that those two layers of timber made it look like a carrier, the flight deck of a carrier. They could have put forty layers, it still wouldn't have been a flat top. The crane, the superstructure, the bridge, everything.

JM: The turrets, without the guns?

LS: Well, you see, the turrets, when -- now, some of the books say when they UTAH was stripped, they removed the twelve-inch guns, see. Well, the turrets were still there. It still didn't look like it. But to make it even worse, our five-inch anti-aircraft guns were mounted on top of the turrets. See, so it couldn't look . . .

JM: Not much like it.

LS: . . . from the air, from the land, from the sea, from underwater, there's no way that anybody who has a nice size visual acuity and depth perception to fly an airplane could have possibly mistaken that ship for the *UTAH*, for a carrier. But I've read dozens of books and they all repeat -- Walter Lord was the first one. So as the *UTAH*'s sinking --- and it looks like a barn, you know, a floating barn. No way. But I guess when one guy writes something, then all these guys write the same thing, see. I think like now, they're beginning to change their story.

JM: Just one of the myths, there's a lot of them and . . .

LS: Yeah.

JM: . . . they're just starting to go away.

LS: Yeah.

JM: We only have a couple minutes left, so the last thing I'd like to ask you is, this is the fiftieth anniversary and December 7 is the day that history changed. How do you feel about relations now between the United States and Japan?

LS: I don't feel any enmity, except that they couldn't beat us with guns, so now they're doing it with money. They're slaving out for --- with commercially, and that's the only regret. I've visited with a pilot this morning in the hotel. I've visited with the hostesses. I feel no enmity except that they're buying up Hawaii, for one thing. They're all the Japanese cars. So that's the only --- and that's not because they're Japanese, it's because they're beating us commercially. I feel the same way about the Germans.

JM: Modern 1991 economics.

LS: Yeah, yeah. We had 'em flattened out. We give 'em all the money to build up and now they're choking us economically. That's the only regret I have, as far as, you know, looking at these guys. I think a Japanese, Yamamoto, you're Yamamoto? He is? You know, the admiral that planned all this was Yamamoto. I don't feel -- I can look at him and I don't feel bad.
(Chuckles)

JM: Well, I want to thank you for coming today and thank you for sharing.

LS: All right. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW